The Science of Self-Compassion

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What is Self-Compassion?
• The three components of self-compassion (Neff, 2003b)
  • Self-Kindness vs. Self-Judgment:
    ➢ Treating self with care and understanding rather than harsh judgment
    ➢ Actively soothing and comforting, supporting and protecting oneself
    ➢ Desire to alleviate suffering (any pain or emotional discomfort – large or small)
  • Common humanity vs. Isolation
    ➢ Seeing own experience as part of larger human experience not isolating or abnormal
    ➢ Recognizing that life is imperfect (us too!)
  • Mindfulness vs. Over-identification
    ➢ Allows us to “be” with painful feelings as they are
    ➢ Avoids extremes of suppressing or running away with painful feelings

Fierce and Tender Self-Compassion (Neff, 2021)
• Yin - Tender aspect of self-compassion
  ➢ “Being with” our suffering: comforting, soothing, validating
• Yang - Fierce aspect of self-compassion
  ➢ “Acting in the world”: protecting, providing, and motivating

Research on self-compassion
• Explosion of research into self-compassion over the past decade
• Most research conducted with the Self-Compassion Scale (Neff, 2003a)
• Other research methods: mood induction or interventions

Self-compassion linked to wellbeing (Zessin, Dickhauser & Garbadee, 2015)
• Reductions in negative mind-states: Anxiety, depression, stress, perfectionism, shame, body dissatisfaction, disordered eating
• Increases in positive mind-states: Life satisfaction, happiness, self-confidence, body appreciation

Physiological underpinnings (Gilbert, 2000)
• Self-criticism
  ➢ Threat defense system
  ➢ Cortisol and adrenaline
• Self-compassion
  ➢ Mammalian care-giving system
  ➢ Oxytocin and opiates
How self-compassion works in the body (Kirschner et al., 2020)
• Decreases sympathetic response (e.g. cortisol)
• Increases parasympathetic nervous system response (e.g. heart rate variability)

Self-compassion and physical health (Phillips, & Hine, 2019)
• Enhanced immune response in response to social stress
• Better sleep quality
• Fewer physical symptoms (aches, colds, etc.)

Self-compassion vs. self-esteem (Neff & Vonk, 2009)
• Self-compassion offers same mental health benefits without pitfalls
  ➢ Fewer social comparisons
  ➢ Less contingent self-worth
  ➢ No association with narcissism

Common misgivings about self-compassion
• Means weakness
• Is selfish
• Will lead to self-indulgence
• Will undermine motivation

Self-compassion is linked to coping and resilience
• More effective coping with divorce (Sbarra et al., 2012)
• Less likely to develop PTSD after combat trauma (Hiraoka et al., 2015)
• Better coping with chronic health conditions (Siros, 2015)

Self-compassion is linked to more other-focused concern
• More caring and supportive relationship behavior (Neff & Beretvas, 2013)
• Less controlling and verbally aggressive
• More forgiveness and perspective taking (Neff & Pommier, 2013)

Self-compassion is linked to healthier behaviors (Terry & Leary, 2011)
• More exercise, more doctor visits, safer sex, less alcohol use

Self-compassion is linked to greater motivation (Breines & Chen, 2012)
• Personal standards just as high, not as upset when don't meet them
• Less fear of failure, more likely to try again and persist in efforts after failure
• More personal responsibility and motivation to repair past mistakes

Early influences on self-compassion
• Secure versus insecure attachment (Wei, Liao, Ku & Shaffer, 2011)
• Parental criticism and family conflict (Neff & McGehee, 2010)
• History of sexual, emotional, physical abuse (Vettese et al., 2011)
Self-compassion in Therapy
• Transdiagnostic mechanism of effective therapy
• Compassion Focused Therapy (Paul Gilbert, 2010)
• Self-compassion in Psychotherapy certificate program (CMSC)

Mindful Self-Compassion (MSC; Neff & Germer, 2013)
• Empirically supported 8-week program designed to teach self-compassion skills
• 150,000 people have taken program
• 2200 trained teachers worldwide
• Adaptations for online training, young adults, teens, educators, parents, couples

Self-compassion for Healthcare Communities (Neff et al., 2020)
• Six one hour sessions, usually taught at lunch
• No meditation or homework
  ➢ Practice self-compassion on the job
• Increased self-compassion, compassion for others, mindfulness, compassion satisfaction
• Reduced depression, stress, burnout, emotional exhaustion, depersonalization
• All gains maintained for at least 3 months

References
Soothing your heart and feeling connected: a new experimental paradigm to study the benefits of self-compassion. *Clinical Psychological Science, 7*(3), 545-565


**RESOURCES**

**Websites**

Center for Mindful Self-Compassion (For information on MSC 8-week courses and intensives and MSC teacher training): www.CenterForMSC.org

Self-Compassion website (Self-compassion survey, videos, research articles, guided meditations and exercises): www.Self-Compassion.org
Books:


Online Training:

Live Online MSC (10 week live online course): www.CenterforMSC.org

Audio Training:

Self-Compassion Step by Step (2013). Kristin Neff: www.soundstrue.com

The Yin and Yang of Self-Compassion. 3 hr audio training by Neff: www.soundstrue.com